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Murals of Iowa, 1886-2006

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dubbed "Corn Country." The collection under review bundles samples of Croy's 1910s–1950s magazine work, excerpts from his nonfiction works, and chapters from the memoirs *Country Cured* (1943) and *Wonderful Neighbor* (1945). The earliest tales bear the stamp of his friend Ellis Parker Butler, the Iowa-born humorist who first invited Croy to join the Authors League and who introduced him to the editors of the major magazines. By the early 1920s, Croy's byline was appearing regularly in *Collier's* and the *Saturday Evening Post*, and he had developed a distinctive style of his own. This was a writer capable of creating both the comic adventures of the culturally oblivious Peters clan (*They Had to See Paris*, 1926) and *West of the Water Tower*, a naturalistic novel of small-town sin and shame that earned its author a Pulitzer Prize in 1923. Croy's reminiscences of rural Missouri are warm and whimsical, casual in tone but not slangy, often suggestive but never smutty. They paint a timeless picture of farming life.

Beyond one out-of-print monograph and a few articles, to date no serious examination has been made of Homer Croy's writings. Nor has his fascinating life been documented in a full-length biography. The introduction and section headings to this book by editor Zachary Jack — a seventh-generation Iowan — are a valuable addition to what little today's readers might know about the one-time chronicler of Corn Country.

Murals of Iowa, 1886–2006, by Gregg R. Narber. Des Moines: The Iowan Books, 2010. 234 pp. Illustrations, notes. \$24.95 paper.

Reviewer Breanne Robertson is a Ph.D. candidate in art history at the University of Maryland. She is the author of "'The Cultivation of Corn in Mayan and Modern Times': Lowell Houser's Winning Design for the Ames Mural Competition" (*Annals of Iowa*, 2011).

As Maine politicians and cultural leaders clash over the fate of Judy Taylor's labor-themed mural at the Augusta Department of Labor building, *Murals of Iowa, 1886–2006* offers a timely and persuasive argument for the preservation of Iowa's endangered artistic heritage. In this foray into the history of Iowa murals, Gregg R. Narber expands the scope of his earlier research on New Deal murals to provide a comprehensive look at mural art in Iowa from the late nineteenth century to the present day. With this ambitious undertaking, he seeks to familiarize Iowa residents with their cultural heritage, thereby increasing their appreciation for and protection of these public monuments.

Narber chronicles concurrent developments in society, politics, and fine art to impart a more sympathetic attitude for public art com-

missions and to instill respect for their cultural value. Six chapters, organized chronologically, introduce readers to Iowa murals of the American Renaissance (1886–1920), the pre–New Deal era (1920–1933), the New Deal era (1933–1945), and the post–World War II period (1945–2006). Each section begins with a general historical overview followed by a series of discrete entries on individual artworks. Narber’s descriptions vary in length and content, depending on available data and relative importance. He variously describes subject matter, artist biography, patronage, reception, and state of preservation. Given the author’s previous publications on New Deal history, it is not surprising that a significant portion of this book is given to explicating the brief but vibrant period of Iowa art between 1933 and 1945. As might be expected, Narber also devotes considerable attention to Iowa’s most famous artist, Grant Wood.

Narber advocates the conservation of Iowa murals not only for their aesthetic appeal, but also for their educational value as reflections of ideology, both past and present. Writing for a general audience, he explains that murals communicate the attitudes and beliefs of the era in which they are made and thus help to establish and sustain defining mythologies “about who we are, and what makes America a nation and Iowa a state” (12). He demonstrates through his book that these ideas are flexible and that negotiations are common, especially when a mural message challenges a community’s self-perception. Destroying the offending mural is not the answer, however. The current mural controversy and others like it, including the painting over of *Law and Culture* (1935) at the Cedar Rapids federal courthouse in the 1970s, highlight the important cultural role that murals once played and still continue to play in shaping community identity.

The strength of Narber’s approach emerges in the sheer volume of material he covers, which itself proclaims the rich cultural heritage belonging to Iowa citizens. Attentive visual analysis and meticulous research reinforce this impression by underscoring the unique circumstances informing each work of art while also linking it to larger national and occasionally even international trends. Much of chapter three, for example, is devoted to the Mexican mural movement for its profound influence on New Deal artists, including Iowa muralists Harry Donald Jones and Lowell Houser. This balance of individual and comparative study allows for a more nuanced understanding of recurring mural themes over time and space. Narber rightly insists on the need for a more inclusive account of mural history if we are to recognize the productive crossings of politics, society, and culture in the evolving stories we tell about ourselves.

Narber employs an impressive array of archival and secondary sources to elucidate the circumstances undergirding Iowa mural projects, as copious footnotes attest. For this fact alone, *Murals of Iowa* will be a boon to future scholarship. Numerous illustrations also enhance the visual appeal and scholarly weight of this book by providing a visual record of Iowa murals unprecedented in print to date.

Nonspecialists interested in Iowa art will appreciate the author's conversational tone, lucid explanations of art historical terminology and iconography, and occasional popular culture references. Narber is at his best when discussing lesser-known New Deal murals, such as the intriguing and controversial mural at the Cedar Rapids courthouse and the contemporary murals sponsored by Principal Financial Group. His intimate knowledge of these latter artworks stems from his tenure with the company's art purchasing program, and his fluid writing reflects a clear appreciation of and comfort with these subjects.

Murals in Iowa is not perfect, however. Narber at times sacrifices his authorial voice and narrative focus in an effort to compile a complete record of political, social, and cultural histories. His heavy reliance on block quotations from primary and secondary sources attests to the breadth of research underpinning this book, but these passages are not always used to best effect, especially when they replace Narber's own capable visual analysis, and the frequency with which they occur tends to disrupt the master narrative.

Nonetheless, *Murals of Iowa* is a welcome addition to the small but growing literature on Iowa murals, which remain relatively unknown to scholars and Iowa residents alike. Narber proposes and demonstrates that our lack of awareness is the greatest risk to Iowa murals today. His book brings to our attention a rich and diverse constellation of Iowa art and challenges us to enlarge our cultural heritage beyond the works of a single artist or even a single decade. Filled with delightful images and local anecdotes that will appeal to a wide range of readers interested in Iowa culture, *Murals of Iowa* provides an accessible and highly informative survey of Iowa murals that will help to correct that neglect.

Memories of a Farm Kitchen, by Bob Artley and Rob Artley. Gretna, LA: Pelican Publishing Co., 2010. 95 pp. 38 recipes, illustrations. \$22.95 cloth.

Reviewer Jill M. Nussel is a lecturer at Indiana University–Purdue University Fort Wayne. In her research and writing, she has used cookbooks to shed light on immigrants and their communities. She is completing a book manuscript, "From Stewpot to Melting Pot: Charity Cookbooks in America's Heartland."